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LYDIA MARTENS AND SUE SCOTT

UNDER THE KITCHEN SURFACE: DOMESTIC PRODUCTS AND CONFLICTING CONSTRUCTIONS OF HOME

DR. LYDIA MARTENS IS A SOCIOLOGIST OF CONSUMPTION AND DOMESTIC LIFE AND WORKS AT DURHAM UNIVERSITY. SHE IS CO-AUTHOR (WITH ALAN WARDE) OF *EATING OUT: SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION, CONSUMPTION AND PLEASURE* (CUP) AND CURRENTLY RESEARCHES DOMESTIC PRACTICE–PRODUCT RELATIONSHIPS AND CHILDREN'S CONSUMPTION.

SUE SCOTT IS A SOCIOLOGIST OF GENDER, SEXUALITY AND RISK. SHE IS DEAN OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES AT KEELE UNIVERSITY. SHE CURRENTLY RESEARCHES RISK IN THE DOMESTIC CONTEXT AND IS WORKING ON A BOOK (WITH STEVI JACKSON) ENTITLED *THEORISING SEXUALITY* TO BE PUBLISHED IN 2006.

This paper examines how the product world around domestic cleanliness plays with the dual construction of the home as safe and dangerous. By participating in this construction, cleaning products engage with a salient concern in domestic life—how to achieve and maintain a safe domestic environment. We have investigated the discursive commentary on domestic cleanliness and safety in one domestic advice manual: *Good Housekeeping* magazine, over the period 1951–2001. This investigation has also provided insights into the discursive character of cleaning products. We have been interested in how product discourse

moves the home discursively from exhibiting dangerous tendencies towards the attainment of safety through the utilization of products. However, reading product narratives over the late modern period makes it apparent that competition and the need for product innovation in an otherwise difficult market has created complexities that confront the domestic sphere with more dangers. We draw out the consequences of our findings and reflect on how this informs the assertion made by Ger and Yenicioglu (2004) about the connections between contemporary consumer culture, cleanliness and the domestic safe haven.

> INTRODUCTION

This paper examines how the product world around domestic cleanliness plays with the dual construction of the home as safe and dangerous. The motivation to write this paper has been two-fold. First is our curiosity in how mundane products relate to domestic routines and practices and vice versa. In pursuing this, we have taken to heart the objection that the sociology of consumption has shifted too much in the direction of how the consumer accomplishes identity work through consumption to the detriment of developing understanding of how production and consumption interrelate (Harvey *et al.* 2001). Work on two related research projects[1] has allowed us to focus on one particular case-study of that relationship, that between products which exist as aids to domestic cleaning and domestic cleanliness practices. This has stimulated a questioning of how mundane products successfully make their way into the domestic sphere and become part of practices, such as domestic cleaning, which are mostly routine in nature and which engage the practitioner in little conscious reflection and thought.

Portraying domestic cleaning as routine does not mean such activities are trivial. Our ethnographic work on kitchen practices (Martens and Scott 2004) suggests that domestic routines are an important resource for providing certainty in domestic life. Such routines pose a significant challenge for innovation in relevant product worlds, as marketers have to provide convincing reasons why the domestic practitioner should consider the incorporation of new products into their existing routines or even to allow new products to adapt and change those routines. One strategy for doing this is to destabilize the domestic conviction that the home is a safe place and to portray a product as an essential aid to reinstating the domestic sphere as a safety zone. This product world is, however, a complex and competitive one, with many producers vying to place their product in the cupboard under the kitchen sink.[2] In order to better understand the relationship between domestic routines and mundane domestic products, it is therefore important not only to examine what strategies have been adopted by marketers to recommend their wares to the domestic practitioner, but also to delineate which narratives become apparent when one listens to their combined voices over time.

There is another reason for our interest. We have argued that domestic cleaning is in essence about the maintenance, ordering, and organization of domestic material culture (Martens and Scott 2005). As such cleaning is clearly a form of consumption practice that belongs to the domain of "ordinary consumption," which includes those practices that are "so mundane, so taken-for-granted, so normal, that most people, including scholars, fail to appreciate their significance." (Gronow and Warde 2001: 4). In this context, the article by Ger and Yenicioglu (2004) entitled "Clean and Dirty: Playing with boundaries of consumer's safe havens" has provided a welcome dent in this scholarly silence.[3] Of particular interest to us is the fact that this paper argues a strong causal link exists between the consumer's need to create a safe domestic environment and the anxiety provoking nature of contemporary consumer culture. Yet, while this paper offers insights into how consumers discursively create safe havens by identifying what is clean and safe as opposed to dirty and dangerous, it does not elaborate on how cleaning products discursively engage with the binary constitution of the home as safe and dangerous. A second reason for writing this paper has therefore been to build on the insights of this account through an investigation of discursive trends in the world of cleaning and domestic products designed to establish whether and how this world is in and of itself anxiety-provoking and/or alleviating. This paper therefore unashamedly homes in on the product side of this product–practice relationship. In another related paper, we address the consumption side of our concerns by examining domestic strategies for the incorporation and exclusion of cleaning products into domestic routines.[4]

We start with a short discussion of the domestic need for a safe domestic environment and indicate how the notion of the home as a safe haven has historically been challenged through a variety of public discourse and debate. The discovery of germs is used to illustrate how such discourse moved from the scientific/health domain to that of the market during the twentieth century. We then consider in greater detail the proposition put forward by Ger and Yenicioglu, followed by an argument as to why it is useful to analyze the discursive nature of the product world around domestic cleanliness. We have done this through an analysis of product narratives in *Good Housekeeping* magazine between 1951 and 2001. After a short discussion of our methodology, we commence with a discussion of our findings and finish with a conclusion.

CONCEPTUALIZING CLEANLINESS, CONSUMPTION AND THE SAFE DOMESTIC HAVEN

The notion of the domestic sphere as a safe haven has historically been potent and prominent (Kaika 2004; Mallett 2004). As the site where everyday life takes place and where real people and families live and interact there exists, according to Sellerberg (1991), a strong

social need for the domestic sphere to be seen and experienced as safe. Protecting the members of a domestic circle from harm has been conceived as a primary concern of the domestic practitioner, ingrained in the very meaning of home making and housewifery (Berner 1998, Tomes 1998). This is apparent especially when we consider one facet of domestic social and cultural life, that of cleaning. A commentary on domestic cleanliness in late nineteenth-century Sweden by Berner suggests that the purpose of cleaning was to create a home that provided a harmonious and ordered refuge or sanctuary that served as the antidote to the "dirty public world outside" (1998: 314). Yet, this "world outside" has historically made incursions into private domains, and by doing so, has frequently undermined domestic practitioners' efforts to render the home harmonious and safe.

It is clear that discursively, the domestic sphere has been pulled in opposite directions, veering between understandings of it as dangerous and safe and these discursive shenanigans are an indication of struggles between private and public interests in the home and domestic life (see e.g. Kuronen 1999 and Saugeres 2000). One of the greatest challenges to the notion that the domestic sphere provides a safe haven for its inhabitants came from the discovery of that minute *invisible* thing, the germ, in the late nineteenth century (McClary 1980). As outlined by Tomes (1998), the scientific discovery of germs occurred at a point in time when sweeping epidemics claimed the lives of thousands of citizens. It gave rise to new institutions, such as home economics, the crucial task of which consisted in teaching and training women in domestic practice (housework) that focused on the eradication of germs in the domestic sphere (Attar 1990). Germ theory thus came to impact significantly on domestic practice. Home economic advice suggested that the home maker brush and scrub toilets with disinfectant powder on a daily basis. To prevent dust from flying about and spreading on, for instance, uncovered food, the advice was to change practice from dry to wet mopping, and the vacuum cleaner, a new technological invention, was hailed as "a great hygienic boon" (Tomes 1998: 144) as it sucked up dangerous dust. Germ danger was also one of the social concerns that stimulated the critique of Victorian decor and the introduction of more modern internal design that was easier to keep clean (Forty 1986). The growth of an advice literature, which in Britain included domestic tomes, such as Mrs Beeton and woman's monthlies, like *Good Housekeeping* magazine, was also part of this expansion of consumer culture, and targeted white middle class women specifically.

In its early stages, germ worries provide one of the clearest examples of the connection between public health concerns and the private practice of domestic cleaning and more specifically, of public discourse attempting to change those practices. But, as Tomes has pointed out, germ dangers did not remain salient as a medical-scientific and public health concern. During the early twentieth century,

medical scientists shifted their focus of interest from prevention of ill health to cure, and an important reason why germs remained in the public consciousness was because marketers were now selling a series of new products, the existence of which was premised on their role as aids in domestic cleanliness.[5] The market took over from public health discourse in communicating with domestic practitioners about the salience of germ dangers. In recent decades, the image of the home as an unsafe place has again become accentuated through the return of germs in popular, mediated and academic discussions of ill health and the threats inherent in modern day living (Lacey 1993; Maurice 1994; Purvis 2004). Not surprisingly, this appears to have given a boost to the perhaps dwindling prominence of the market for disinfectants. The reader is no doubt familiar with the burgeoning new market in anti-bacterial products that appeared during the 1990s and including products like Microban, used widely in all sorts of products for the home.

The stimulus to commercialization around domestic cleanliness during the twentieth century was not limited to anti-bacterial concerns. As germ consciousness waned during the course of the twentieth century, domestic aesthetics and self-presentation became once more prominent as aspects of cleanliness (Tomes 1998; Martens and Scott 2005). Nevertheless, this phenomenon raises the question how the connections between cleaning, consumption and domestic safety may be conceptualized. A recent argument developed by Ger and Yenicioglu (2004) has sparked our curiosity because, like them, we have an interest in the meanings of domestic cleanliness in late modernity, the growing product world around this and the notion of the domestic safe haven. This article is a position paper that does not engage with its own primary data. Drawing on Douglas' (1966) *Purity and Danger*, the authors theorize cleaning as a magical practice through which consumers define boundaries that juxtapose what is of "the self" or "inside" and therefore safe and clean, and what is of "the other" or "outside" and therefore dangerous and dirty. The framework for this argument is the idea that disorganized consumer culture forms the basis of a threatening environment, to which consumers react by magically creating so-called geosocial maps. These are defined as "the imagined location of the consumer in the social" (Ger & Yenicioglu 2004: 462); established by the definition of cultural boundaries. The geosocial map, which stands for the imaginary safe haven people attempt to create wherever they are, is a conceptualization that comes close to the Lefebvrian term "space envelops" that is utilized by Kaika (2004) in an equally interesting paper on constructions of domestic space. Another interchangeable concept is that coined by Goffman (1972) as "the Umwelt." These notions all try to capture the idea that, in various ways, people attempt to create a symbolic cocoon around themselves and those close to them, which is nevertheless demarcated by real

spatial boundaries; inside the cocoon life is safe, outside it, life is unpredictable. Essentially, therefore, Ger and Yenicioglu (2004) reinforce what has been argued elsewhere, that is, the importance of the domestic safe haven in domestic life.

Our concern with their approach is that it conceptualizes a relationship between domestic practice and consumer culture that remains too abstract. This is evident in Ger and Yenicioglu's unsupported statement that the stimulus for domestic cleaning and the creation of a domestic safe haven is the complexity of the market place, which confronts and confuses the consumer with its multitude of commodity signs. In the context of the authors' justified claim that consumption scholars have not shown much interest to date in domestic cleanliness and cleaning products,[6] we find it surprising that they do not themselves address this relationship. Crucially, Ger and Yenicioglu operate with a specific assumption about the nature and character of consumer culture that has its origins in postmodern theorizations associated with Baudrillard (1983, 1988), Lyotard (1984) and Jameson (1991), and that today finds its continuation in some marketing perspectives. They refrain from an elaboration of *why* consumer culture is experienced as anxiety-provoking or *how* it came to be that way. More importantly and perhaps because they do not acknowledge that cleaning products are *utilized* in cleaning practices, they fail to consider whether *cleaning* products might be experienced as frightening and if so, *how* they have come to be conceived in that way. Knowing this is vital, because many cleaning products "live" in the domestic sphere and there they are embedded into domestic practices in diverse ways. The implications of this for the experience of domestic dangers and domestic efforts to create a safe domestic haven therefore need to be investigated.

In the use of the concept "magical" we find another indication of the separation between domestic cleaning and consumer culture in this paper. At one level, conceptualizing domestic practice as "magical" clearly links in with the symbolism "at work" in such practices: it allows for consumer agency and it focuses attention on identity work; especially that associated with constructions of "the self" and "the other" in which the authors are clearly very interested. We have no problem with this *per se*. However, whether consciously or not, it means that one important symbolic and material aspect of domestic cleanliness has been overlooked in the account, and this is the salient meaning of cleaning as a method for tackling dangers inside the home that are seen to pose potential threats to the household's members.

The safe domestic haven may operate at the level of the imagination, but the homes people live in and the material culture which fills homes have real material properties. To that effect, Kaika (2004) distinguishes between the notions of "house" and "home," suggesting that these concepts respectively stand for the material reality and

the ideological construct of the domestic sphere. This distinction is important because it suggests that the "threatening environment" in the form of "disorganized consumer culture" or potentially dangerous domestic commodities is not necessarily "outside" the domestic sphere. In the commodities and product discourses that are taken home, consumer culture and its dangers, whether imagined or real, actually become part of the private sphere. Given that consumers take the products of consumer culture into their domestic safe haven, it is important to address how they deal with the apparent contradictions this involves in the everyday conduct of domestic life. In other words, how it is that they come to "incorporate" the contradictory products of consumer culture in their efforts to create a domestic safe haven through cleaning, and in the face of these contradictions, what strategies do they devise to render the domestic safe again?[7]

Here, we proceed with an examination of the discourses of the domestic product world, and more specifically those pertaining to products that aid domestic cleanliness and safety in the late modern period. How do such products communicate with the domestic practitioner? What claims are made about the trustworthiness of these products? And how do domestic products talk about each other? Moreover, what evidence is there to suggest that this world has become more complex in recent times, generating the circumstances that might induce increasing confusion on the part of domestic practitioners/consumers making decisions about what is best for their households?

EXAMINING CONSTRUCTIONS OF DOMESTIC SPACE AND PRODUCTS

This paper is grounded in a content analysis of *Good Housekeeping* magazine. *Good Housekeeping* appeared in the UK for the first time in March 1922 (Horwood 1997, White 1970), when it commenced the delivery of reputable information and advice to its mainly white and middle-class female readership on domestic matters. To create its specific character and niche in the market for women's magazines, and to establish and maintain the magazine's reputation over the years to come, it was accompanied in 1924 by the Good Housekeeping Institute (here referred to as GHI). Through its description as a "non-profit-making limited liability company independent of *Good Housekeeping*," [8] the magazine emphasized the impartiality of the institute and the latter reminded the reader frequently of its modern rigor, authority and trustworthiness.

> Nearly thirty-seven years have passed since the domestic experts, engineers, chemists and space-planners of the GHI—the oldest consumer advisory organization in this country—piloted the scientific approach to domestic problems, to bring

> in a new age for British housewives. A lot of time [...] a lot of experience. Yet today the Institute is as forward-looking as ever, and, building on that experience, is meeting in the same pioneer spirit the challenge of modern living (*Good Housekeeping* January 1961: 39).

Good Housekeeping is perhaps the best example of a "domestically-orientated magazine" (Horwood, 1997: 24) positioned at the centre of the interface between the domestic and commercial spheres. It not only helped the housewife with "running the home," it also helped her with shopping, by offering "expert" guidance on what to buy rather than simply providing advertisements for products as was done in other women's magazines. In this context, the GHI is further described as a "champion of consumer rights, which has been setting benchmarks for quality since 1924" (*Good Housekeeping* February 2001: 3).

We examined the content of 72 issues of the magazine, basing our selection procedure on an examination of all issues appearing in the magazine at 10 yearly intervals, starting with the year 1951 and finishing with 2001. We searched for articles and items that tapped into constructions of domestic space, domestic anxieties, cleaning practices, cleaning products and discourse on germs and hygiene. The finer details of our research and analysis work are discussed in Martens and Scott (2005).

For the purposes of this paper, the magazine provided excellent material of a variety of types. Firstly, *Good Housekeeping* must be considered as a domestic product in its own right: it comes at a price, is situated within a market of women's magazines and subject to competition for readers and advertisers (White 1970, Winship 1987). Its existence is predicated on its being a source of information and advice on domestic practice, targeted at a female readership with an interest in home making. An analysis of the magazine's content thus enables an examination of the nature of its advice on domestic safety, and to identify change and continuity in the content of its reporting over time. We categorize *Good Housekeeping* as a safety advice product.[9]

Advertisements in the *Good Housekeeping* magazine form the second type of data we have scrutinized. These encapsulate the discursive formulations that accompany domestic products through marketing efforts. We have been particularly interested in advertisements for cleaning products that appeared in the magazine over the time period investigated. A variety of product groups fall under that bracket, and include: detergents for clothes washing; dish washing products (washing up liquids and powders and tablets for the dish washer); general purpose cleaners for floors and surfaces; and anti-bacterial cleaning products. As only the latter relate directly to germ anxiety, it is this group of products that we have concentrated on in

our discussion here. We have categorized these as safety products, perhaps contradictorily, given what is to come. Lastly, we have paid attention to the efforts made by the magazine to recommend itself and its advice to its readership, and we have paid attention to the manner in which "self-recommendation" has been formulated in the discourse of cleaning products. The reason for this was to investigate the strategies marketers adopt to convince the domestic practitioner that the product or service it offers is trustworthy.

DISCURSIVE MANEUVRINGS AROUND DOMESTIC SPACE AND CLEANING PRODUCTS

Figure 1 shows an advertisement for the antibacterial product Lifeguard taken from the magazine in May 1951. Lifeguard was one of a series of anti-bacterial products which were advertised in the magazine in 1951 and 1961; others included Parazone, Zoflora, Jeypine, Sanpic, Harpic, Brobat and Gar-Stick Rod. In addition, the magazine featured insect killers such as Flit, Motholin, Mothacs, Flyol and Vapona. It is advertisements for these products that kept germs "alive"—that is, present in the public consciousness—in the early postwar years when general interest in this "health problem" had faded in other areas of social life. In a number of these advertisements, we find a representation of the housewife as guardian of the home and the health of its inhabitants, with the advertised product as her essential assistant. The Lifeguard advertisement is interesting, because it is an exemplary portrayal of the domestic safe haven and how it may be guarded against germ dangers. The housewife appears from behind the front door, with an enlarged head and hand held up to indicate "stop." She stands guard over her home and its security. In this home, germs have to remain outdoors—the advertisement effectively uses the binary opposition between inside and outside discussed by Ger and Yenicioglu (2004). However, the housewife's efforts alone are not sufficient; her home is a "Lifeguard house," where the home safeguard, Lifeguard, assists the housewife in her important task. It "searches out and destroys the germs."

A second danger is, however, evident. Referring to a clearly already existing and underlying worry about the safety hazards of disinfectants, Lifeguard describes itself as "non-poisoning, non-staining, and so safe to use" providing "confidence" to its users. This last message is underscored by another one in larger print, stating "safeguard your home the safe way". Lifeguard describes itself as not just any product, but one that can be trusted and that is safe to use. Presumably this makes it stand out from others, which though perhaps setting out to do the same thing as Lifeguard, are by implication *not* safe. This advert therefore indicates double trouble. The housewife is warned at the same time of the dangers of germs and of the chemical substances that are used in the products designed to eradicate them.

Figure 1
Advertisement for Lifeguard (*Good Housekeeping* May 1951: 96).

This Lifeguard advertisement is particularly interesting because it connects these two different dangers with the safety of the home. Germ dangers made their appearance in the late nineteenth century and as discussed above, the commercial world responded to this scare with the introduction of a range of anti-bacterial products, insecticides and fungicides. While these products were clearly intended to help the domestic practitioner in her efforts to rid the home of harmful germs, in our excursion through *Good Housekeeping* content this was the first intimation we found that these products entailed dangers in their own right. In what follows, we provide an overview of the domestic dangers that were discussed in the magazine between 1950 and 2001. This shows a historical shift from germ dangers to chemical dangers and back again to include germ dangers.

Heralding domestic dangers

Domestic safety is a prominent theme in the pages of *Good Housekeeping* magazine throughout the years we investigated. Safety worries crop up over the years and are related to domestic products and appliances, germs, chemical dangers, environmental concerns, accident risks and children. Of particular interest is the fact that *Good Housekeeping* operates as a commentary on domestic products—many of which are assessed and scrutinized by the GHI on the basis of, among other things, their safety credentials. Some examples of products that captured our eye because of their portrayal as potential domestic hazards over the years were aerosol cans (March 1961), domestic cleaning chemicals (August 1971, March 1981), furniture (foot stools in April 1981), broken Christmas toys (January 1991),

cling film (June 1991) and microwave ovens (various in 1991). These examples show that *Good Housekeeping* portrays new domestic products as suspect until their safety credentials have been verified through product testing by the Good Housekeeping Institute.

While domestic products appear to have been under scrutiny throughout the period we investigated, the same is not the case for other domestic dangers. Like the dangers of domestic products, the risks of accidents in the domestic sphere appear to be covered across the years we investigated, but the dangers posed by domestic chemicals and germs provide different trajectories. Germ dangers are particularly interesting because, with the exception of only a few editorial references that implicate them, they were only evident in advertisements for disinfectants in 1951 and 1961. Germ dangers come into focus in the magazine's editorial content only later on. There is one reference to fatal botulism in June 1981, but in 1991 concerns about the contamination of foods with harmful bacteria are expressed frequently, with readers given various advice. Given the Listeria and Salmonella bacterial food scares in the UK at this time, this is hardly surprising. So in 1990, shoppers are warned of the dangers of leaving frozen foods bought in the supermarket in the car too long (November: 227); in 1991, readers are advised on how to store food safely in connection with Christmas and associated entertaining (January: 133); readers are updated about Listeria (February: 122); and microwaves are discussed in relation to irregular heating of food and the risk of contracting food poisoning as a consequence (August: 140). In the last decade of the twentieth century, we also see the reappearance of advertisements for anti-bacterial products; products notable for their absence in 1971 and 1981.

Chemical dangers are evident in the magazine already in 1961 and 1971, when *Good Housekeeping* states that bleach and disinfectants pose a safety risk to household members. However, from 1981 onwards, different chemical dangers become implicated in a series of worries, multiplying consumer anxieties around chemicals in and around the home. In March 1981, the magazine publishes an article by Judith Cook on the potential health dangers of weed killers and insecticides that are routinely used in British homes. In June 1991, the GHI advises care in the use of cling film while reflecting on recent MAFF[10] warnings that using this product on fatty foods might release harmful chemicals incorporated into the plastic. From 1981 onwards, too, we start to find coverage on "green issues," with 1991 issues including the regular feature "Good Earthkeeping," the title of which makes a clear connection between the avoidance of dangerous chemicals and care for the domestic and the public environment. "Good Earthkeeping," the flagging of the "greenness" of new products and advertisements of "green products" in the magazine are an indication of commercial activity in the development of "product solutions" to this "growing" social problem. In relation

Figure 2
Ecover (*Good Housekeeping* May 2001: 184).

to this trend, Figure 2 illustrates the Ecover range of biodegradable cleaning products which were advertised in the magazine in 2001.

The figure of the child plays a particularly prominent role in the constitution of the domestic sphere as a danger zone in the *Good Housekeeping* editorial feature and in product advertising. Children are portrayed as being especially at risk of accidents in the home, as particularly susceptible to the dangers of germs and most likely to swallow the chemicals designed to kill them, thus, products are often assessed with a specific view to establishing whether they would be harmful to children. So, in an article entitled "Safety, Safety, Safety for Small Fry" (*Good Housekeeping* September 1961: 40–41), the Institute provides an extensive and horrendous list of accidents that happen to children in the home.[11] Later, in a GHI article called "Small Wonders" (*Good Housekeeping* January 1991), the new Finish Compact Dishwasher Detergent is recommended in the first instance as a greener cleaner because "it comes in 20 gram tablets which gives a more precise amount for a dish wash." Yet, the greenness of the product is compromised by the fact that each portion is individually

wrapped. Nevertheless, the GHI points out that the wrapping makes the product safer when there are children around as they "could be mistaken for sweets." (Ibid*:* 136) and the wrapping provides a protective layer around the product by making it hard to get into.

In 2001, *Good Housekeeping* contains, for the first time in 30 years, an advertisement for a disinfectant. The Domestos advertisement appears in three consecutive months, and like the Ecover advertisement in Figure 2, it implicates young children. Each time it appears, it features a bottle of Domestos with, in each of the months, a different child's toy tied to it.[12] Hiding in the shadow of the bottle, we read: "GERMS DON'T JUST LURK IN YOUR LOO. Like kids, they get everywhere. So make sure you get there before your family does" (*Good Housekeeping* April 2001: 66). In this advertisement, germs are presented as similar to the young child—unpredictable and therefore in need of constant vigilance. This demands a level of parental reflexivity that is questioning rather than accepting of domestic security and is a state of mind that questions the conviction in a domestic safe haven. The use of the child in these representations works potently to re-emphasize that "good housekeeping" is crucially about safeguarding that which is both priceless and vulnerable in the family,[13] and that is at risk not of some abstract consumer culture outside the home as Ger and Yenicioglu (2004) would have it, but of germ dangers found inside the home.

Discursive complexities around domestic dangers

Reading the content of the magazine across the research years provides evidence of a multiplication in reported dangers. In the early period, germ dangers received limited consideration in the magazine, though attention to the risks of domestic accidents and domestic products was continuous. In later years and alongside more numerous chemical dangers, germs return as domestic dangers in editorial content and it is probably accurate to say that numerically more domestic products come under scrutiny in the magazine. However, this shift needs to be considered alongside another, equally salient feature, and that is increased discursive complexity, inconsistency and contradiction in the content of the magazine around the hazards we have just discussed. The magazine contains examples of products that in the postwar years were described as aids and which in subsequent years came to be seen as dangerous. It also contains examples of products which were labeled dangerous in editorial coverage while still being advertised in issues of the same publication year. Lastly, discursive complexity is evident in the diverse products which culminated around germ and chemical health scares.

The anti-bacterial products and insecticides advertised and discussed in the pages of the magazine are good examples of products recommended as an aid to the homemaker in ensuring the good health of her family but later judged dangerous because of the

chemical substances used in them, and considered as risky in the home and beyond. Zoflora, advertised in the magazine in 1951 and 1961 over consecutive months is a good example of such a product. It is depicted as a diverse product, being useful in the sickroom, the child's bedroom, the nursery, adult bedrooms and in the parlor after a party. The description for its use in the child's bedroom in an advertisement appearing in January 1951 is of particular interest and again connects the child with germ dangers. The advertisement shows a mother putting her child to sleep. The picture, surrounded by flowers, reads:

> But germs never sleep! Frequent mist sprayed. Zoflora destroys airborne germs in the nursery, induces untroubled sleep. Its powerful antiseptic properties dispel unpleasant odours and leave a safer, cleaner atmosphere (*Good Housekeeping* January 1951: 100).

Figure 3
A Zoflora advertisement (*Good Housekeeping* January 1951: 100).

This advert plays on confusions that exist around germ "realities": linking "bad" odors with "airborne" germs suggests the intermingling of remnants of the zymotic theory of disease with germ knowledge. The product works to counter such "airborne" germs, and comes in a convenient spray container. The emphasis on airborne suggests the equation of germs with insects and/or dust, as germs are themselves not airborne and they do not leave an odor. This shows how product advertising presented confusing "knowledge" to the domestic practitioner from an early stage, and that it would be wrong to suggest that this is a specific feature of our late modern world. In 1951 and based on its product discourse, Zoflora was a combination of an insecticide and a deodorizer. Its insecticidal properties are recognizable by one of its ingredients, DDT, which in 1951 and 1961 was clearly seen to be a good sales pitch given its clear presence in some of the otherwise rather small advertisements (see for example the November 1951 issue, page 142).[14] By the 1970s, however, this substance had become banned in the USA and Sweden in the early 1970s for being carcinogenic and having a detrimental effect on the nervous and the reproductive systems.[15]

As touched on above, the trend in the questioning of chemical substances used in the home is also recognizable in the article on the chemical dangers of household insecticides and herbicides in the March 1981 issue of *Good Housekeeping*. The author, Judith Cook, received the Margaret Rhonda Award by the Society of Authors; an award given to a female journalist once every three years for writing "on a subject of special human concern" (August 1981: 27). In the August issue of that year, *Good Housekeeping* argues that the article had sparked substantial interest from readers and from industry, some of which was reported and discussed in the magazine.

> Our important article, *Are you buying Killer Chemicals?* in the March issue provoked an enormous amount of publicity and—as expected—a great deal of disagreement, particularly from people in the industry, as well as letters from all the people who praised the piece and wrote gratefully to us for pointing out the dangers (Ibid).

Even so, contradictions regarding this type of chemical hazard are apparent in the magazine. In the original article, the producers of the Vapona Flykiller are questioned on the safety of their product, which contains the chemical organophosphate compound dichlorvos. While they defend their product and its safety features, the article nevertheless clouds this type of domestic product with uncertainty. Interestingly, the magazine continues to accept advertising for this product during the summer months of the same year, in the same way they had done in 1971. Here, then, is evidence of the magazine criticizing and recommending the same product type in the same time-span.

As discussed above, the 1990s have seen two different types of product innovation pertaining to domestic cleanliness and associated with environmental concerns on the one hand, and on the other, worries about bacterial pathogens finding their way into the domestic kitchen through food. These product types espouse opposing theories about the salient dangers in everyday life and consequently, what action should be taken by the domestic practitioner. The environmental product Ecover (Figure 2) argues that life is too full of "unnecessary chemicals" and that doing without such chemicals means choosing for a "healthy lifestyle" for yourself (the adult consumer) and your child (featured in the advertisement). Associated with this environmental lobby are current discursive worries that our homes are too clean, making it hard for our children to build their immune systems. The product range associated with the Domestos brand, on the other hand, is silent about chemical dangers while portraying germs as still the most urgent threat to familial health. The use of powerful bleach and other anti-bacterial products is therefore recommended to improve general hygiene and health standards.[16] So, over the time period studied, anti-bacterial products have typically moved from a "safety enhancing" reputation to one which emphasizes their dangerous qualities, and, as the Domestos example shows, currently exist with these binary qualities apparently quite successfully. What we find here are therefore two different causes of concern and two opposing suggestions for courses of domestic action. It is left to the domestic practitioner to figure out which course of action should be followed (Giddens 1990, 1991).

PRODUCT COMMUNICATIONS: A DISCUSSION

Given the conundrum identified in the introduction, that routine domestic practices pose a challenge to product innovation, how does our analysis inform an understanding of how cleaning products communicate with domestic practitioners? In this paper, we have only considered *one* group of cleaning products and we have examined the content of a safety advice product, *Good Housekeeping* magazine. This shows that consumer anxiety has historically been a potent sales tactic. In the first instance, cleaning product discourse associated with germ and insect anxiety or with chemical concerns works on frightening the consumer out of a sense of domestic security. Of course, domestic safety is promised to return again when the cleaning product in question is used in practice. The domestic practitioner's cleaning efforts will thus not be in vain. But the story becomes more complex when we look further.

In examining *Good Housekeeping* between 1951 and 2001, we have tapped into a historical and cultural text that has enabled us to sketch a narrative of prominent and shifting dangers associated with domestic cleanliness and domestic space in the late modern period. Following White (1970) and Winship (1987), we would argue

that *Good Housekeeping* offers a cultural script that reflects social and cultural trends in representations of the home, but that has also been proactive in the sense that, given reporting on domestic products has been an important aspect of the magazine's activities, it can therefore not be seen as an innocent bystander as these historic trends have taken shape. The consequence of many different and competing products speaking for over fifty years to the domestic practitioner has been an enumeration in domestic anxieties. Our research shows how they can now worry about many different things: whether they should pay serious attention to germs or whether it is more important to ensure that no dangerous chemicals enter the home; whether they should accept the products of consumer culture and the messages they bring, or whether these should be rejected. Expounded in the pages of the *Good Housekeeping* magazine, we find a historical shift away from modern confidence towards a degree of late modern distrust. One could wonder whether this trend has had consequences for the way in which products can communicate with the domestic practitioner. The fact remains that products do still communicate, but the question is whether the modern day consumer is more distrustful of the messages that are purveyed to them, seeming to suggest that the return to domestic safety and security is that bit harder to achieve. However, to get closer to an answer to this question, it is necessary to also look at consumer reception and the question whether the scientific and reflective questioning that has occurred in the magazine over the years is now mirrored in vigilance rather than "rest-assuredness" as the preferred disposition of the "good" domestic practitioner.

It is clear that while the discursive nature and probably the chemical constituents of such products have changed over time, brand names have quite a good survival rate. Products like Zoflora, Parazone, Detol(x), Domestos, and not to forget *Good Housekeeping* magazine itself, have a long track-record and all still exist today. The discursive manifestations of such branded products engage in important ways with notions of product trust and reputation. This is evident at the level of individual product discourse, such as that for Lifeguard discussed earlier. By identifying itself as "non-poisoning, non-staining and so safe to use" it not only argues that it is a trustworthy product itself, good at the job it is designed to do, but it does so by creating the possibility that other products cannot to be trusted. What we have been unable to do in this paper is to track the discursive history of specific product brands over time, in order to see how trustworthiness and reputation are created and maintained in view of what effectively is an increasingly complex cacophony of voices that puts scorn on this product world.[17] The closest we have come to such an investigation is the *Good Housekeeping* magazine itself, which in addition to its GHI also has a history of guarantee labels. The most famous of these labels was the "Seal of Guarantee,"

which was in operation in 1951 and 1961 and used in support of the GHI's product recommendations. What seems apparent, though, is that trustworthiness is mobilized in the competitive shenanigans of this product world. It may be that the current atmosphere of product distrust is a welcome corollary of this narrative trend (rather than an intended consequence) that supports the currently strong branded product against intrusions by newcomers.

CONCLUSION

The idea that contemporary consumer culture is complex and contradictory and that this poses problems for consumers, is a major truism in some strands of consumer studies. In this paper, we have questioned the uncritical operation of this idea by Ger and Yenicioglu (2004), who use it as the rationale for why contemporary consumers seek to magically create safe havens around themselves through their cleanliness practices. We have shied away from identifying these human beings as consumers in the first instance. By doing so, Ger and Yenicioglu accentuate the centrality of consuming in social life, and while we do not disagree with this, we are also acutely aware that cleaning practices are a form of domestic practice (as, incidentally, is shopping) engaged in by domestic practitioners. Our preference for the use of this concept is intended to call attention to this fact, which in turn calls attention to the relationship between the private domestic world with its values and discourse of care and attention to the wellbeing of family members and the world of domestic products, where the need for profit has seen complex historical developments in "speaking" to consumers in efforts to ensure the successful adoption of products into domestic practice (Akrich 1992; Warde 1997).

While consumer culture is argued to play a crucial role in relation to cleanliness practices and the social "need" for domestic safe havens, Ger and Yenicioglu treat it at an abstract level. It is "the marketplace, with its continuously increasing symbolic nature and infinitely many alternative consumption choices" that "poses a disorderly and threatening environment for consumers" (Ger and Yenicioglu 2004: 462). This argument gives the reader the impression that the dangers facing the domestic practitioner come from "outside the home" and trouble them in their heads; being confused perhaps by the plethora of things, images and discourse that bombard the consumer in the market place, cleaning becomes that activity which provides peace of mind while a sense of control returns to the sphere in life which can truly be called one's own and which is ruled by temporalities, values and life cultures that are quite distinct from the market realm. Importantly, what they have failed to note is that products which derive from consumer culture are used and utilized in cleaning practices. When these are construed as dangerous, they invariably bring such dangers "inside the home." Our analysis

of cleaning products and their representation shows that cleaning may not be such a "relaxation inducing" activity. Because consumer culture does not remain outside the domestic realm but is solidly positioned within it, its contradictions also come closer to the hearth, than is perhaps warranted by Ger and Yenicioglu.

Contradictions around domestic cleaning products have come to light through competitive shenanigans in the marketing of domestic products; in efforts to innovate and be successful, marketers have created discourse around new products that have laid bare the dangers (or other negative sides) of "other" products. Moreover, as indicated by our examples of products advertised in 1951, this aspect of marketing was clearly already present in the direct postwar years—it certainly is not a new tactic that may be associated with late modern consumer culture. This brings us to the associated question whether our research on domestic and cleaning products provides support for the postmodern view that consumer culture has a tendency towards increasing complexity and confusion? We think there is some evidence to that effect. It would be true to say that the types of domestic dangers covered in the magazine were present throughout the years investigated. Looking closer, however, public anxieties around chemical dangers were heightened as more suspect chemicals were identified in the "ingredients" lists of domestic products, leading *Good Housekeeping* magazine, for instance, to provide quite a strong discourse on environmental concerns and to offer greener and traditional alternatives to the chemical substances sold in the market place. In addition, as outlined above, germ anxieties became prominent again as the UK experienced a series of scares around bacteria that cause food poisoning in the late 1980s, giving *Good Housekeeping* a reason to provide recommendations on practices that might alleviate those risks. Generally, the trend in *Good Housekeeping* seems to be that various practice alternatives are offered for specific problems with the suggestion that "our readers are capable of making up their own minds" which action to follow (*Good Housekeeping* August 1981: 27). Lastly, the number of products discussed in the magazine appears to be greater than was the case in the early postwar years. Where these are new products, the issue always arises whether they can be deemed safe, leaving the domestic practitioner to conduct a "risk assessment" before contemplating whether and how to incorporate them. If the rising number of products discussed in *Good Housekeeping* reflects a multiplication of domestic products on the market, it is likely that this has added to the domestic burden of running a household safely and securely.

We have also arrived at a statement that the complexity of consumer culture is related to the safe domestic haven, but we have come to it in a different way from Ger and Yenicioglu. We conclude with some of the nuances to our conclusion. The first point to make is that consumer culture is not some abstract scary entity that affects

the domestic practitioner "outside the home" so that they turn to seek security inside the home. Instead, in the products that are taken home, consumer culture brings dangers directly "inside the home," challenging the enterprise of rendering the domestic safe. Secondly, the practice of cleanliness is therefore not simply and solely expended to protect the home from "outside" dangers, such as strangers, but to protect the home from potential threats to the health and safety of its inhabitants, including those brought into the home by the products of the marketplace. The salience of this point is most vividly illustrated and recognized by marketers when they portray children in advertisements that point to the urgency of germ or chemical dangers. Lastly, our reading of trends in product narratives over the past fifty years suggests that because it is increasingly difficult to attain, the need for a domestic safe haven may be more urgent now than it was in the past. This may have different outcomes. In a world where the domestic practitioner is "trained" into a disposition that is always reflexive and vigilant, symbolism becomes relatively ineffectual as a means to secure a safe domestic haven. Frequent feelings of domestic anxiety may well be the result. It may also be that the domestic practitioner closes themselves off from that world. By ridding themselves from the troublesome aspects of consumer culture and by rejecting its products, perhaps such a strategy will enable them to "believe" again in the effectiveness of their own practices.

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NOTES

1. One is an ESRC funded project (RES-000-22-0014) entitled "Domestic Kitchen Practices," which was conducted in 2002–2004. While referring to this project here, this paper deals with research that has come out of another project which constituted content analysis of the *Good Housekeeping* magazine over ten-yearly intervals between 1951 and 2001. The End of Award report of the first project contains detailed discussion of the methodology adopted (see Martens and Scott 2004). For a detailed description

of the content analysis read on and see Martens and Scott 2005)

2. The Domestic Kitchen Practices research revealed that the under-sink cupboard is a prime location for cleaning products. Alternative places were shelves positioned high up in the kitchenette or the toilet and the garage. Cleaning products used in the bathroom were also frequently stored there.
3. Incidentally, in an earlier paper (Martens and Scott 2005) we have argued that this silence is a characteristic of the late modern period only, as historians have bestowed significant attention on cleanliness and cleaning. This material covers history until the middle of the twentieth century.
4. Unpublished research available from the author: Martens, Lydia. 2005. "Cleaning Danger Out of the Home: Material Practices and the Symbolic Construction of Domestic Space."
5. See Vinikas (1992) and Sivulka (2000) for similar evidence in relation to bodily cleanliness.
6. We would agree with this in relation to the contemporary period. However, historians have shown an interest in cleanliness and consumer culture. See for instance Burke (1996), Forty (1986), Hoy (1997), Loehlin (1999), Sivulka (2000) and Vinikas (1992).
7. These issues are addressed in unpublished research available from the author: (Martens, 2005: see note 4).
8. "Guide to Shopping," *Good Housekeeping*, October 1961 p. 3.
9. For a more detailed discussion of our categorisation of how safety relates to domestic products and those for children more specifically, see the unpublished research available from the author: Martens, Lydia, Sue Scott and Emma Uprichard. 2005. "'Safety, Safety, Safety for Small Fry:' Children and Safety in Commercial Communities of Parenthood."
10. The British Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries, which was then the government body responsible for ensuring food safety for consumers.
11. "Mutilating injuries from new appliances, mixers, driers, mincers and cutting tools: injuries from objects falling from a height, such as cake-tins, and irons insecurely placed on narrow shelves, or from children knocking against badly sited sharp-edged tables, cups board doors and open drawers: piercing injuries from scissors, knives and tins: poisoning through drinking or eating antiseptics, household cleaners, agricultural products or cosmetics: burns caused by an unguarded fire or stove setting clothes alight: and scalding."
12. Sadly, permission to reprint this advertisement in the article was refused by Unilever UK.
13. See also Martens *et al*. (2005, see note 9)
14. The dimension of this black and white advertisement was 6 by 9 cm.

15. For further details, see http://www.epa.gov/opptintr/pbt/ddt.htm, and http://extoxnet.orst.edu/pips/ddt.htm (accessed 2 December 2004).
16. http://www.unilever.com/ourbrands/homecare/Domestos.asp (accessed 30 September 2005).
17. Doing so is difficult, as it requires access to the guarded product archives of the products discussed here.

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